



Critical Sociology and Social History

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Introduction

1.1 Let me begin with a story about intellectual interchange which Pierre would have liked. It is well known that the philosopher Wittgenstein changed the entire tenor of his philosophy after 1929, primarily as a result of a critique by the Italian economist Piero Sraffa in the course of their regular walks and conversations in Trinity College, Cambridge. Sraffa is said to have convinced Wittgenstein that his idea that a proposition and what it describes must have the same logical form was untenable by brushing his chin with his fingertips in a Neapolitan gesture which indicates scepticism. 'What is the logical form of this?' he wanted to know. These conversations were clearly of fundamental importance to Wittgenstein. What he owed to Sraffa, he said, was an "anthropological way" of seeing philosophical problems, i.e. the realisation that social conventions and rules contribute to the meaning of our utterances and gestures.

1.2 They were clearly not equally important to Sraffa, as he told his pupil and friend (and Pierre Bourdieu's friend) Amartya Sen^[1]. The point he made, Sraffa said, was 'rather obvious'. But it was obvious only because this 'anthropological' approach to philosophy was a common subject of discussion in the leftwing intellectual circles to which Sraffa belonged, and particularly familiar to Antonio Gramsci, with whom Sraffa was intimately linked from the days of *Ordine Nuovo* to his death. I begin my paper with this story, not because it happens that Gramsci was concerned with the same questions as Bourdieu, though in a different way and operating in an Italian and not a French intellectual context, but because it illustrates the cultural subjectivity of all intellectual exchanges. We read our own interests into an author, not his. Inevitably non-French historians read Bourdieu, whose work could not possibly have come from anyone but a French intellectual formed in and writing in France after the world wars, not in terms of his own thinking and its development, but against their own. We are conducting not a dialogue of the deaf, for I think I understand what he is saying, but parallel soliloquies which sometimes appear to coincide. I would ask you to bear this in mind if my reading of Pierre's work is selective and I take some of it for granted.

1.3 In the light of this preliminary warning, what has Bourdieu contributed, what can he, contribute to the work of historians today? The first thing to note about him is the centrality of both history and interdisciplinarity in his work. The 100th number of the *Actes de la recherche en sciences sociales* (1993) is before me. Bourdieu intended it as an occasion for 'la reaffirmation d'un projet.' Of its nine articles five are by historians or on plainly historical subjects and, incidentally, six are by authors from outside France. Indeed, a glance at the *Actes* might well suggest that the journal became increasingly preoccupied with historical enquiry in Bourdieu's last decade. And he was used to working with historians, since he found a home in Braudel's Maison des Sciences de l'Homme, and was listed by a German-American survey, together with E.P. Thompson, Eric Hobsbawm, Peter Laslett and Maurice Godelier, as part of a current of anthropological interest to be found in contemporary French and British historiography, Marxist and non-Marxist^[2]. He joined Clemens Heller's exciting international 'tables rondes de l'histoire sociale' and published his commentary on our discussion of the history of strikes^[3]. I vividly remember our conversations at the end of the 1970s on the need for a history of sports – in which he and the *Actes* took a considerable interest. In short, Pierre was at ease with historians, or at least with some of them.

1.4 And yet, by Bourdieu's own decision he chose to become not a historian but a philosopher turned sociologist. In his major writings references to historians are considerably rarer than those to philosophers and ethnographers/social anthropologists, and very few – perhaps among his French contemporaries only Georges Duby – tend to occur in several volumes. Moreover, there are a number of historians of past or present eminence whose names are never cited, as well as the occasional famous historian – Michelet for instance – whom he specifically rejects. Readers of *Homo Academicus* must be aware that he was critical

of the history taught as part of French higher education. In spite of his gratitude to Braudel whose support for him was unstinted, he was clearly not sympathetic to the kind of history of the 'longue durée' then popular among the *Annales* historians^[4] And he frequently detects in the historical profession a lack of interest in the historic analysis of the concepts they use in analysing the past, in an 'usage reflexif de l'histoire'^[5]. That is not entirely fair, especially to the Germans – one thinks of the encyclopedic *Geschichtliche Grundbegriffe* – but it is true that historians, other than the historians of ideas, are not usually much involved in philosophy. Nor do philosophers practise much history. In this respect David Hume in the eighteenth century and Croce with his school in the 20th are exceptional, but their historical work is not much remembered.

1.5 Nevertheless, the past is central to Bourdieu's work, because it is the soil that feeds the roots of the present, and of our capacity to understand and deal with it. And conversely, I am one of many historians who admire him and have been inspired by him. For one thing, had he wanted to, he could have been a historian himself, which is visibly not the case with Michel Foucault, Louis Althusser or Derrida, to cite but some names of French thinkers familiar to historians abroad. He had the historian's passion for what was concrete, specific and singular, the curiosity and gift of looking at everything in sight which good anthropological fieldworkers share with good historians. Braudel used to say: 'historians are never on vacation. Every time I get into a train, I discover something.' Bourdieu would have approved. Only a man naturally gifted for social history would have immediately noted a characteristic of rural society, namely that: 'la fréquence relative des dictons, d'interdits, des proverbes et des rites fortement réglés décroît quand on va des pratiques qui sont liées à l'activité agricole ou qui lui sont directement associées... aux divisions de la journée ou aux moments de la vie humaine, sans parler des domaines apparemment abandonnés à l'arbitraire, comme l'organisation intérieure de la maison, les parties du corps, les couleurs ou les animaux.' (SP 333). He was an equally passionate and perceptive observer of what lies below the surface of everyday life in his country: the unspoken and unrecorded assumptions of contemporary French life, the symptoms that indicate the nation's health. But what are the actual questions Bourdieu asked about history? Are they the same as those asked by social historians? Yes and no.

1.6 I think history had a double function for him. In the first place it was the central tool for what he called 'la critique reflexive', that is to say how thinkers become conscious of the specificity, even the subjectivity, of the social observer's point of view, and also of the disciplines describing themselves as 'social science'. Whoever tries to understand the social world does so on the basis of what Bourdieu calls 'objectivist presuppositions', because only these allow us to judge the veracity of our observations, to provide a legitimation for our methodology, a justification for our generalisations. This was all the more essential for a sociologist like Bourdieu, for whom scientific theory 'se dévoile seulement dans le travail empirique où elle se réalise' (*Réponses*, op. cit., p. 136). But since Marx – the Marx who refused to think of himself as a Marxist and invented the sociology of knowledge- it has been clear that the road to the reality we investigate inevitably leads through the dense and dark forest of the assumptions and wishes the researcher brings to his work. We come to our task not as free-floating brains but as men and women brought up in a certain situation in a certain kind of society, in a particular patch of the globe, at a particular moment in history. Nowhere is this more true than in sociology, at least if we think of it as Pierre did as having as its object 'les champs de lutte, non seulement les champs des luttes de classe mais les champs des luttes de la pensée scientifique.' But these are personal as well as social characteristics, even though for Bourdieu 'the socialized body (what is called the individual or the person) is not opposed to society; it is one of its forms of existence.' (Sociology in Questions p 15) He knew that the purely private man or woman must never be left out of sight. That is why for him 'cette sorte d'autoanalyse fait partie... des conditions de développement de ma pensée. Si je puis dire ce que je dis aujourd'hui, c'est sans doute parce que je n'ai pas cessé d'utiliser la sociologie contre mes déterminations et mes limites sociales; et notamment pour transformer les humeurs, les sympathies et les antipathies intellectuelles qui sont, je crois, si importantes dans les choix intellectuels' (Choses dites 37). Reflexive autobiography is a necessary part of his thought and of his writings, for these constitute not a finished corpus but Bourdieu's continuing, sometimes repetitive, always developing but never-ending dialogue with his times.

1.7 History is what, for Bourdieu, allows us to overcome these obstacles. 'C'est en découvrant son historicité que la raison se donne les moyens d'échapper à l'histoire' (Choses Dites 36). 'Il-y-a une histoire de la raison; cela ne veut pas dire que la raison se reduise à son histoire, mais il-y-a des conditions historiques de l'apparition sociale de communication qui rendent possible la production de la vérité.' (ibid 43-44).

1.8 However, history is not only the gate through which we must pass if we want to reach reality. It is a central element of that reality itself. 'I endeavour to show that what is called the social *is* history. History is inscribed in things – in institutions (machines, instruments, laws, scientific theories etc.) and also in bodies. My whole effort aims to discover history where it is best hidden, in people's heads and in the postures of their bodies. The unconscious is history. That's true, for instance, of the categories of thought and perception that we spontaneously apply to the social world.' (Soc in Q 46) Bourdieu calls for 'une histoire structurale...qui ferait apparaître chaque état successif de la structure examinée comme étant à la fois le produit des luttes précédentes pour maintenir et transformer cette structure et le principe des transformations qui en découlent, à travers des contradictions, les tensions et les rapports de force qui la constituent.' (*Réponses*, op. cit., p. 68).

1.9 Bourdieu himself hoped, by means of his concept of 'fields' (champs) 'de faire disparaître l'opposition entre reproduction et transformation, statique et dynamique, ou structure et histoire.' (*Réponses*, op. cit., p. 67) As a historian of social transformations I am incompletely convinced. Certainly Bourdieu's model helps us to understand 'le surgissement des événements purement historiques, telles que la crise de mai 1968 ou n'importe quelle autre grande rupture historique' (ibid.), assuming that the two such crises he has analysed in some detail, May 1968 and the Paris revolution of 1848 can be regarded as 'grandes ruptures

historiques'. This is an important contribution to the international historico-sociological debate on revolutions which has dropped into the background since the decline and fall of Soviet Communism. The early 21st century is not a historical moment favourable to social revolutions in practice or in theory. But interest in this type of 'rupture historique', and in Bourdieu's studies of it, will no doubt revive.

1.10 And yet, the model seems to me to use a somewhat narrow and chronologically short-range concept of what constitutes 'une grande rupture historique', and it does not sufficiently enquire into the relation between the 'ruptures' in this sense - mostly those of the 19th and 20th centuries with which he was chiefly concerned - and the dynamics of the global process of the evolution and transformation of human existence and activities on this planet. The central problem of world history is and must be the process which has brought homo sapiens from the palaeolithic to the era of the internet. It is (so far) an extraordinary but complex success story of how a particular species of mammals has become capable of transforming itself by transforming its environment - of 'acting upon 'nature' as John Locke and Karl Marx would have said. This process has accelerated so dramatically in our own lifetimes, that we can observe it running parallel with that of the traditional history of events in politics, culture, the arts, and more or less at a comparable pace. In my view the extraordinary and growing acceleration of social change since the middle of the 20th century is by far the most important historical phenomenon of our times - a phenomenon utterly without precedent. If there are still historians in the year 3000 their books about the last century will pay far more attention to it than to the wars, massacres and revolutions of that century.

1.11 While Bourdieu's model of 'fields of struggle' and his methods are applicable to any situation, it was designed for other historical questions. It is therefore only of limited relevance. It was not designed to explain either of the two central experiences of human history, the 'neolithic revolution' which transformed humanity from a species of hunter-gatherers into one of cultivators, and the industrial revolution which is still transforming our globe..

1.12 On the other hand Bourdieu's approach is quite indispensable for the understanding of the operations of social *reproduction*, including the reproduction of social systems basically embodying inequality, that is to say for practical purposes all social systems. It is perhaps most fully put forward in the remarkable *Le Sens Pratique* (1980), in my view the central pillar of his *oeuvre*. Here lies the value of Bourdieu's extremely fertile concept of 'habitus', which unifies structure and human action through practice in a given world, the agent as the product of society and the past and as a subjective pursuer of strategies. (See esp. *Réponses*, op. cit., pp. 114-15)^[6]. I cannot imagine a historian who has ever taken an interest in pre-capitalist societies, especially peasant societies, who does not immediately recognize the extraordinary perceptiveness of everything Bourdieu says about them. Any student of the actual operations of customary or judge-made law in such societies will recognize the flexibility with which general principles are adjusted to particular persons, circumstances and social relationships. 'L'habitus a partie liée avec le flou, le vague' (*Choses Dites*, op. cit., p. 96). It is also part of Bourdieu's acute power of observation that he recognizes its limits 'dans des situations critiques et dangereuses' and therefore the necessity for formalization ('codification') of procedures, and consequently what he calls 'une vertu propre de la forme' (ibid). Though all this is easy to recognize in preindustrial societies, it is Bourdieu's enormous merit to have recognized the continued force of habitus-shaped practice in contemporary capitalist societies. It also provides him with a supplementary justification for criticising theories of so-called 'rational choice'. If he were alive, he would be delighted by the story - it recently appeared in a lecture to the American Academy by an eminent mathematician, expert in the statistics of probability - about how he tried to decide whether to move from Stanford to Harvard. He consulted a friend about the problem. 'But you are an eminent decision theorist' said the friend. Why not apply decision theory?' I cite the professor's answer from his text: 'Come on, Sandy, this is serious.'^[7]

1.13 The *habitus* thus fills the space between historical structure and human agency, between conscious action and historic determination or, to use the classical Marxian terms, it brings together 'base' and 'superstructure'. It provides a concrete answer to the question what is actually happening when (in Marx' words) 'men make their own history, but they do not make it just as they please; they do not make it under circumstances chosen by themselves, but under circumstances directly encountered, given and transmitted from the past.'

1.14 But here lies the problem. All the elements of 'habitus' conspire to ensure reproduction and not change. "Ce sont les innombrables stratégies de reproduction à la fois indépendantes, souvent jusqu'au conflit, et orchestrées de tous les agents concernés, qui contribuent continuellement à reproduire la structure sociale, mais avec des aléas et des ratés, issues des contradictions inhérentes ou des conflits ou des concurrences entre les agents qui y sont engagés" (*Le sens...*, op. cit., 114). The problem of long-term major historical change is how it can be brought about, at least for most of history before the 18th century, by men and women living in ways designed to prevent any major change. But such transformations did take place. How? In my view Bourdieu has no persuasive answer.

1.15 What he does show is that, in a society undergoing constant and dramatically accelerating change, almost all human beings at the start of the 21st century are in the position of his Kabyles of the 1950s. All of us are being precipitated into a world in which labour and human relations are not 'la simple occupation conforme à la division traditionnelle des activités ou à l'échange traditionnel des services'^[8]. All men and women must both adjust to and resist the pulverisation of the social world of social and personal relations in which they have grown up and its both adjust to and resist its expectations. It is precisely the type of society dedicated to 'the pursuit of happiness' (inseparable in a capitalist market from the purchase of goods and services) by human beings conceived as individuals, which inevitably generates that 'Misère du monde'^[9] into which he enquired in the 1990s.

1.16 Why those who are and know themselves to be ,exploited and treated as inferiors, nevertheless accept their situation most of the time, is a problem that has long preoccupied those who wish to change society for the better, and especially those whose political commitment to the cause of a better world attracts them to the social sciences. As the superb chapter on 'les modes de domination' in *Le Sens Pratique*^[10] demonstrates, this is a major theme in Bourdieu, and his approach to it may well be considered superior to Gramsci's, who also confronted this problem with his concept of 'hegemony'.

1.17 However, I have reservations about his terminology. In particular I wish Bourdieu's had not chosen to use the ambiguous and misleading term 'violence' ('la violence symbolique'). Though violence, or the power of physical coercion, is present, overtly or by implication in all social orders, the term as used by Bourdieu diverts attention from the real *modus operandi* both of the 'univers sociaux où les relations de domination se font, se défont et se refont dans et par les interactions entre les personnes' and the social formations 'médiatisées par des mécanismes objectifs et institutionnalisés tels que le "marché" autorégulé" au sens de Karl Polanyi'^[11]. 'Violence' throws no light on that process of fetishisation by which not only Marx' 'commodities' conceal the social relations that underlie them, but by which 'les relations de pouvoir et de dépendance ne s'établissent plus directement entre les personnes; elles s'instaurent dans l'objectivité même, entre des institutions' (*Le sens...*, op. cit., 229) – and as Bourdieu rightly holds, are all the more socially effective as well as economically efficient. But that, as he knows, is not a system of power in the usual sense: it is of all forms of "persuasion clandestine" – Bourdieu's words – 'la plus implacable' because 'exercée tout simplement par l'ordre des choses.' (*Réponses*, op. cit., 143).

1.18 Here Bourdieu's analysis of how stability is achieved in societies conducted essentially by those who hold power for their own purposes, or in their own interests, is particularly significant for the contemporary world. His insistence that social groups of rulers are formed and rule is exercised and transmitted on the basis of a variety of sources of power (or, in his terms, 'capital') is not novel in itself, though brilliantly discussed. However nobody has recognized more clearly than he that formal schooling is increasingly the central maker and definer of social domination in contemporary societies, even in those whose system of educational and cultural differentiation is very different from the French, to which, throughout his career, he devoted some of his most ambitious works.

1.19 How can I conclude these unsystematic remarks on Bourdieu's relevance to historians? He is a thinker whose work converges with that of historians, unlike Foucault, who took from history illustrations for an already constructed narrative or the structuralists like (in his day) Althusser who tried to eliminate what historians regard as history from their systems. More than most other social theorists, he is constantly aware of three things. First, that it is impossible to reduce the vast wilderness in which human beings act upon nature and each other, conscious or not of what they are doing, to a collection of gardens governed by formal systems of rules. Second, that it is equally impossible – both in the practice of social living and the theory of thinking about it – not to systematize human relations. And third, that 'l'on peut toujours établir qu'il aurait pu être autrement, qu'il en va autrement ailleurs, dans d'autres conditions' and – I would add, I hope in Bourdieu's spirit – that it was different once and will be different in future, and so will the way we think about it.

1.20 In conclusion, permit me a personal observation .What has brought me, a Marxist historian in the British tradition together intellectually with my admired friend Pierre, was that I recognized my own historical problematic in his work on the Kabyles, which is the foundation of the more generalized treatment in *Le Sens Pratique*. For both of us it is how men and women live in periods of historical transformation. As it happens we both asked ourselves the same kind of question about comparable phenomena at much the same time. Bourdieu's question about Kabyles in the 1950s was how can we understand 'les conditions de l'acquisition de l'habitus économique "capitaliste" chez des gens formés dans un cosmos précapitaliste.' It happens that my own first book, written about the same time about Mediterranean rural societies was based on an almost identical question. Again, like Bourdieu, I found myself dissatisfied with the structural models of the social anthropologists, though not for Bourdieu's reasons (*Choses dites*, op. cit., p. 19) but because they appeared to be essentially static, i.e. anti-historical and therefore incapable of explaining the evolution of the human species that has actually taken place in the last 10,000 years. And both of us were contemptuous of the relativism of postmodernists.

1.21 I think I even recognize my own hopes as a historian in his as a sociologist.

'L'objet de la science sociale' he wrote in *Le Sens Pratique* (p. 244) 'est une réalité qui englobe toutes les luttes, individuelles et collectives, visant à conserver ou transformer la réalité, et en particulier celles qui ont pour enjeu l'imposition de la définition légitime de la réalité et dont l'efficacité proprement symbolique peut contribuer à la conservation ou à la subversion de l'ordre établi, c'est à dire de la réalité.'

1.22 I am more sceptical than he was of the ability of political action by intellectuals to have much immediate effect. But not the least of my many reasons for admiring Pierre, as a man as well as a social thinker, is that he maintained to the end of his tragically abbreviated life a belief in the capacity of people like us in this room to 'subvertir l'ordre établi, c'est à dire la réalité' . That is why he inspired so many. Four years ago he was awarded the Ernst Bloch prize, in memory of the German utopian social philosopher who invented the 'Principle of Hope': man lives by hoping for a better future. Bourdieu, who was far from utopian, did not, I think, write about Bloch, but he knew why he deserved the prize. *Das Prinzip Hoffnung* is an indestructible and indispensable part of human existence. And Bourdieu remained committed to it, because he wanted to change the world for the better. He did not believe that it was enough for philosophers to interpret it.

Notes

¹Amartya Sen, *Sraffa, Wittgenstein, and Gramsci*, *Journal of Economics Literature*, Vol. XLI, December, 2003.

²Georg G. Iggers, *Neue Geschichtswissenschaft: Vom Historismus zur Historischen Sozialwissenschaft*, Munich, 1978.

³ In the collection *Questions de Sociologie*, 1984.

⁴Bourdieu P., *Choses Dites*, Éd. de Minuit, Paris, 1987, pp55-56.

⁵Bourdieu P., *Réponses : pour une anthropologie réflexive*, Seuil, Paris, 1992, p. 70).

⁶1 'Parler d'habitus, est poser l'individuel, et même le personnel, le subjectif, est social, collectif. L'habitus est une subjectivité socialisée. (*Reponses*, op. cit., p. 101)

⁷Persi Diaconis, 'The problem of thinking too much' in *Bulletin of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences*, Spring 2003, pp. 26-38.

⁸Bourdieu P., *Les structures sociales de l'économie*, Seuil, Paris, 2000, p.15.

⁹English edition: Bourdieu P. et al., *The Weight of The World: Social Suffering in Contemporary Society*, Polity, Oxford, 1999.

¹⁰English edition: Bourdieu P., *The Logic of Practice*, Polity, Cambridge, 1990.

¹¹*Le sens pratique*, op. cit., pp. 224-5.

Note

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